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The National War College

**Dealing With Congress: A Guide to Navigating  
the Bureaucratic Politics of the House and Senate**

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# **Dealing With Congress: A Guide to Navigating the Bureaucratic Politics of the House and Senate**

*"A good government implies two things: first fidelity to the object of government, which is the happiness of the people, secondly a knowledge of the means by which that object can best be obtained."*

*The Federalist, No. 62 (1788)*

## **Introduction**

This is a guide written to help a newcomer in the Washington arena understand how to navigate the bureaucratic politics of Congress.

Many people think it is a highly formal process. That groups of decision makers carefully examine all the options. That the best option is always chosen.

Not so. Most of the process is informal. Most of the lawmakers have little time to examine all the issues, much less the options. Most of the time the best option is chosen. But not always.

As Federalist No. 62 stated above, good government is two things: keeping the people happy and lawmaking. This statement is still true today. Learning how to do both at the same time is a key lesson for doing business on Capitol Hill.

This guide is written in the form of ten commandments to successfully deal with the bureaucracy and politics of Congress. How these commandments apply to real life will then be demonstrated in some recent legislative cases. Both the commandments and the cases are based on interviews with senior military officers responsible for day-to-day liaison with the House and Senate. The cases involve recent examples of how the bureaucracy and the politics of Capitol Hill can be successfully overcome. They illustrate how the ten commandments can be applied by showing how disruptive officer end-strength legislation was changed and how an A6 Wing Improvement Program that was deleted was reinstated.

## **Commandment Number One: Make No Enemies**

You see it all the time. The same Congressmen who just a few hours earlier were trading sharp political attacks on the House floor are now having a great time together at a local dinner. They may have different opinions, but they're not enemies. That's politics. It's a lesson of prime importance. In Washington today you never know whose support you may need tomorrow.

So no matter what happens, no matter how badly you lose on one issue, no matter how stinging the public attacks in committee sessions, never make enemies.

Those who burn bridges are ineffective. You must be able to deal with people as well as issues. Issues come and go; the people are generally the same. Keeping the communications bridge always open is far more important than winning an emotional battle over a particular point of legislation on which you believe your personal honor or that of your Service is at stake. Stay friends, and chances are the issue will come up again. Maybe in conference; maybe next year. Little is ever final in Washington. Politics is the name of the game. You must learn to play it too.

One professional staffer kept over his desk pictures of those issues he had lost in dealing with the Pentagon. He wasn't bitter. He always pointed to the pictures on his wall with good humor. Maybe he didn't forget, but he never made enemies either. Liaison officers still consider him a highly professional public servant.<sup>1</sup>

## **Commandment Number Two -- Make a Lot of Friends**

You've got to create contacts -- friends -- long before you ever think you need them. That takes work.

Start by paying a call on all the key people: Congressmen, Senators, and their staffs. Follow up with a note of thanks for their time. Attend gatherings where these people may be present and make a point to say hello to them all. Respond quickly with any request they may formally or informally give you (keep the military liaisons informed).

Years ago the Navy Office of Legislative Affairs (OLA) set up ship tours for some Congressional staffers. As is the norm, many of the staffers were very young -- some just out of college.

An irate ship captain gave OLA a call after one of the visits asking why he had to spend two hours giving a tour to "some young kid in tennis shoes." The answer was that the Navy always needs friends and even young staffers need to be exposed to the rigors of Navy life. Today that young staffer is still around. Now, however, he is a senior professional staff person on the House Armed Services Committee. He still remembers the warm hospitality of his first ship tour. He has over the years been a big help in solving legislative problems.<sup>2</sup>

Friends: make them long before you need them.

## **Commandment Number Three: Network**

To be effective you must know what's going on. To do that you must network. That means staying in touch with your friends or contacts on a frequent basis. You trade

information. You tell them what you're authorized to tell them. They tell you what they want to tell you.

Over a period of time you start working together. If you give them alerts on pending issues, they will start doing the same. Information is vital. Rumors spread rapidly. Rumors, if discovered early, can be easily extinguished if they're false. Rumors that are allowed to grow unchallenged become law.

Networking keeps you in close touch with rumors. You learn which are true and which are false. You learn to move quickly if they concern your program. By moving quickly you can make friends.

Remember, this is a give and take world inside the Beltway. Don't expect to network long if you're not willing to give up any information. Networking is a two way street, even if the Beltway often is not. Informal politics of this nature is what keeps the bureaucracy moving. You've got to participate.

Both case studies demonstrate the importance of networking. Major disruptions of personnel and loss of an A6 upgrade would have happened if a Congressional liaison had not established a good network.

#### **Commandment Number Four: Do Your People Homework**

You need to know your friends, contacts, or just with whomever you happen to be talking. By knowing, I mean fully understanding what their buttons are. All Congressmen, Senators, and their staffers have issues in which they are personally and emotionally attached, have issues which they hate, have topics they love to discuss, have topics best left avoided, and respond better to certain approaches. You need to know which is which.

A flag officer went by to call on a powerful Congressman shortly after the Gulf war. This Congressman's button was Reserves -- he was an avid, emotional supporter of the Naval Reserve system. His first question to the Admiral was why didn't the Navy use reserve aviators in the carrier battlegroups in the Gulf.

The Admiral wanted to base his answer on the point that deployed battlegroups work up together as a team over a lengthy period of time. Adding new members to this experienced team just before combat would have jeopardized everyone's lives.

Unfortunately, to start this argument, the Admiral said, "Because we wanted to win the war....." He got no further. For thirty minutes he received a brutal verbal lashing by the Congressman -- complete with desk pounding, fist waving, and top of the lung shouts. He never had a chance to finish the sentence ".....with the minimum of casualties, we thought it best to start with teams who were experienced in working together." One phrase hit the wrong button.<sup>3</sup>

Do your homework about people. Liaison officers know this best. They can keep you from going in "cold turkey." The few minutes you have talking with the power players are too important to lose by hitting the wrong button.

### **Commandment Number Five: Do Your Professional Homework**

Know the system. Know what the authorization committees do, what appropriations committees do, what budget committees do, and what conference committees can do.

Then know your subject cold. Remember some Congressmen and Senators have been dealing with your issue since before you joined the service. They may know more than you think. Or their staffers may have briefed them well prior to your meeting. Most lawmakers are very familiar with a few issues, broadly concerned with a few more, and totally ignorant about all the rest. Make sure you're never caught in the position of not knowing more than they do. That includes the supporting staff.

You'll never be able to bluff your way through. If you don't know the answer to a question, tell them you'll get back with an answer. And then do that within 24 hours. There is no better way to establish a good reputation than by knowing your subject first and timely answers to questions second. *Tell the truth -- then you never have to remember what you said.*

### **Commandment Number Six: Win at the Staff Level**

Never forget the power of the staff. Their bureaucratic and political importance equals in many ways the importance of Senators and Congressmen themselves -- at least in the areas associated with the military. When the staff agrees with your position, almost all of the time you will get what you want. If they don't, you will have few victories.

All battles start at the staff level. You must try to win there because they draft the bills. If you have friends in the drafting stages (you networked well), sometimes a single phone call will solve your problem.

The staff trick is that in all probability you heard about a legislative problem through another staffer. We're back to the informal, person-to-person communications that are so important. You must have first established yourself on the staff level. Then you can use it to win your battles.

Staffers -- from the young kids in tennis shoes to old veterans of decades -- are the key. They are well worth your time anytime -- particularly before you need help.

There may be times when you will need to jump the staff because they don't support your position. Remember to keep them as friends when you do. The A6 case study at the end of this guide provides an example of how this is done.

## **Commandment Number Seven: Know the Pressure Points**

Each issue has a few key people -- staffers and Members -- who can help you or hurt you. Find out who these people are.

This is where your networking and friends come into play. If you have regularly cultivated your contacts, they will tell you what you need to know. For problems, find out who is causing the problem, why, and seek a meeting to refute the charges. Problems may be at either the staff level or the Congressman/Senator level. Maybe both. Maybe it's one level in the House and another in the Senate; you need to know. The case studies provide examples of crises on both levels of bureaucracy.

Frequently lawmakers follow the example of established colleagues. One senator said of Sam Nunn, "He knows more about the subject he talks about than anybody else by the time he starts talking about it."<sup>4</sup> On some issues, however Sam Nunn votes, others vote automatically. Know the Sam Nunn of Congress.

Once you find the pressure points and make your case, remember to keep them as friends. Keep the First Commandment -- Never Make Enemies -- always in mind. Politics remains the number one game.

## **Commandment Number Eight: Only One Issue Per Meeting**

Congressmen and Senators are busy people. They are being asked to vote on issues ranging from the type of radar to place on a new ship to how much subsidy to give the nation's wheat farmers. They are not experts on every issue.

Given you have thirty minutes or so in an interview, make just one point. Spend the rest of the time just talking -- ideally about favorite buttons. One major issue is all the Congressman or Senator is going to remember. If you have other issues, take them up with the staff before or after.<sup>5</sup>

## **Commandment Number Nine: Plan Ahead**

Lay your groundwork ahead of time. Plan ahead. Develop your networks early. Create a formal plan that targets pressure points and potential pressure points.

At the end of this guide are OLA examples of planning ahead.<sup>6</sup> Included are parts of a master strategy to tell the Navy's story. This plan has two sections. First it identifies major issues and then sets a program in place to brief these issues to pressure points. Second it identifies naval events that can be used in assisting Congressmen/Senators to better understand Naval issues by personal observation. Seeing a sailor in action on the deckplates is much more memorable than a video presentation on Capitol Hill.

A long range written plan is crucial to the success of a program.

### **Commandment Number Ten: There Are No Real Commandments**

Remember that informal communications are the key to success and effectiveness in Congress. In that regard, there really are no rules that are valid in every situation.

Rules are for formal debate on the House and Senate floors. They are not for dealing with people. In this area personalities reign supreme. You must communicate in whatever manner necessary with these personalities. The commandments apply most of the time, but not all.

Every personality is different. Each piece of legislation has different players. Having laid the groundwork, mold your approach based on the people involved, the political atmosphere of the times, and how important the issue is to you. Not all are number one priority. Bureaucratic politics demand custom made approaches to each goal or problem.

You will win on Capitol Hill by being a friendly player in the give and take process of communicating. The system may not be perfect, but it is still one of the best systems on earth. Don't fight it -- join it.

### **Case Study One: Naval Officer End Strength**

While the Defense Appropriations Bill for 1992 was being marked up in conference committee, the friendly network of contacts established by Navy liaison officers paid off.

Through a weekly, routine "how's it going" call to a professional staffer on the House Armed Services Committee, the Navy learned that additional language was being added to a bill that would prohibit any reductions in the number of service medical officers, while, at the same time, separate language in the bill directed significant overall officer end strength cuts. This information was passed to the Bureau of Naval Personnel where quick studies indicated that by exempting the medical community, an unplanned additional 300 line officers would be forced to be involuntarily separated. If the medical officers were exempted, the Navy needed to have the overall officer end strength increased by 300 if there was to be an orderly draw-down in numbers.

The Chief of Naval Personnel and the Chief of Legislative Affairs met together and developed a plan that would request an increase in the 1992 officer end strength currently being established by the Defense Appropriations Bill. Key staffers, Congressmen and Senators were identified, a simple brief developed to explain the Navy position, and liaison officers went to work on making calls and setting up appointments. These calls were easy to



make because the officers had good working relationships with both the professional and personal staffers.

On the Senate side, one call was all it took. After a liaison officer briefly outlined the Navy's problem on the telephone, the Senate Armed Services Committee staffer said he would take care of it on his end. He agreed there was a problem, and he agreed with the Navy's solution. He promised the officer end strength would be increased on the Senate side by 300 -- no need for a meeting or a brief. The numerous trips this staffer had taken to naval ships and facilities, and the frequent calls and updates given him by liaison officers, had laid a foundation on which he could easily see the problem.

On the House of Representatives side, more work was needed. First Bureau of Naval Personnel briefers met with professional and personal staffers to get them acquainted with the problem. Some agreed with the Navy's proposed solution; some were non-committal.

The next step was flag level briefings to Members themselves. The Armed Services Committee Chairman and ranking minority member were briefed first. Then the problem was presented to several others who were concerned with personnel matters. The Secretary of the Navy, as planned, brought up the issue in an informal manner with the Chairman at a social gathering. Several questions that were posed during the staff and Congressman briefings were all answered in writing a few hours after the briefing.

The result was that in a period of just several days the Navy was able to increase officer end strength by 300 in the 1992 Defense Appropriations Bill.

So what Commandments applied here? All of them.

Had the liaison officer not worked for months at creating a network of friendly contacts, and had he not just as a routine nature called around to keep his contacts, he, and thus the Navy, might never have realized the medical restriction was being added to the Bill. After the conference committee mark-up, changes would have been almost impossible.

The plan to increase end strength was a plan that started first at the staff level and then worked its way up. It targeted the pressure points that were key influences on the legislation. Friendly briefs were conducted to even hostile opponents. The plan was thus successful. It was based totally on the personal contacts built up through briefings, trips and social events. It was based on a thorough knowledge of how bureaucratic politics work. There is generally a way in which everyone can accomplish their goals if the facts are presented in a correct manner.<sup>7</sup>

## **Case Study Two: Reinforcing the A6 Wing**

In the 1992 President's budget, the Navy requested several hundred million dollars to upgrade the wings of A-6 Attack Bombers (Intruders). During House Armed Services Committee mark-up on the 1992 authorizations, a Navy liaison officer discovered that this entire line item was being deleted.

After several phone calls to well-placed contacts he learned that this deletion was the result of the personal efforts of a senior Armed Services Committee staffer. A friendly phone call to this staffer revealed that in fact he was the one responsible, and he had persuaded several of the Committee members to his reasoning.

The Chief of Legislative Affairs for the Navy quickly held a meeting and a plan was developed to first try to change the staffer's opinion, and failing that, to appeal directly to the Congressional Committee Members themselves.

A friendly brief to the staffer was well-received but failed to change his mind. To keep matters friendly, the briefers asked if he would mind if the Navy presented its case directly to the Congressmen. This consent was not required, and the staffer knew it, but the courtesy of asking was just another step in keeping relations friendly.

Flag level briefings were then given to the ranking minority member, the Chairman, several committee members, and the Congressmen whose districts would stand to gain by the employment opportunities involved in the wing rework. Private industry lobbyists were concurrently conducting their own meetings with the same lawmakers.

Each briefing was different, based on the known concerns (buttons) of the Congressman. Some were formal with slides and written remarks. Some were just sitting around a coffee table with no notes or handouts. Some lasted five minutes. Some thirty. The Secretary of the Navy and Chief of Naval Operations mentioned the subject at several social gatherings. Follow-up letters were sent to each Congressman after a brief or interview.

Committee members were persuaded by these meetings to change their positions. The end result was that the A6 wings were reinforced.<sup>8</sup>

The lessons learned in this case were several. Networking first uncovered the problem. A friendly working relationship discovered the source. A plan to protect the line item was developed that started first at the staff level. Keeping a friendly atmosphere, briefers and Flag Officers then moved to the pressure points. They talked to key players in ways that appealed to those Congressmen. They followed through with letters answering additional questions. There were no hard feelings created with the staffer whose objections to the A6 wing program were overridden by the Congressmen who voted. Bureaucratic politics were understood from the beginning.

## Conclusion

Working with Congress means understanding its bureaucracy and its politics. Programs are not always approved based on their simple merits. Any number of players can block progress or get a program cancelled altogether. The trick is to discover these threats early and to move quickly in countering them. No movement is possible in the bureaucracy if you don't first establish a network of friends and contacts. New Congressional liaison officers are seldom effective until they have been in the job for almost a year and have had a chance to establish themselves.

The formal method of making laws set forward in the Constitution is the basic framework for getting the job done in Washington. However, as the case studies demonstrated, there is much more to it than that. You must understand the bureaucracy and the politics that are constantly in play on Capitol Hill. There is an informal network game that must be played. The commandments in this guide will help you navigate a successful program through Congress.

Personality, professional competence, and planning ahead -- those were the keys that unlocked the bureaucratic politics in 1778 when The Federalist was written. They are still true today.

## Notes

1. Captain Donald C. Nash, USN, personal interview, 11 Dec 1991. Captain Nash is the Director of House Liaison in the Office of Legislative Affairs, Department of the Navy.
2. Rear Admiral William J. Fitzgerald, USN, personal interview, 3 Dec 1991. Admiral Fitzgerald is the Chief of Legislative Affairs, Department of the Navy. Story by Captain Nash.
3. Captain Gregory Hansen, USN, personal interview, 9 Dec 1991. Captain Hansen is the Assistant for Legislative Affairs to the Chief of Naval Personnel, Department of the Navy. This and following commandments are based on comments by all three officers interviewed.
4. Davidson, Roger H. and Walter J. Oleszek. Congress and It's Members. Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1990, p. 355.
5. Nash, 3 Dec 1991 interview.
6. The plans attached were provided by the Office of Legislative Affairs.
7. Hansen, 9 Dec 1991 interview.
- 8 Nash, 11 Dec 1991 interview

## Other Source

Smith, Hedrick. The Power Game -- How Washington Works. New York: Random House, 1998.

**OLA CONGRESSIONAL ACTIVITY MASTER PLAN**  
**FIRST QUARTER FY 92**

**ACTIVITIES REQUIRING FURTHER SCHEDULING**

**SOCIAL/MISCELLANEOUS:**

- Navy Birthday Party
- House Armed Services Christmas Party
- Former Navy Member Breakfast
- USNA Parade/Receptions/Football Games
- Navy Ball
- HASC/SASC/HAC/SAC Reception
- Member/Staff Breakfasts/Luncheons
- Procurement Workshops
- HASC Industrial Base Panel (LA-55)
- VADM Malley Calls (LA-55)
- Pearl Harbor 50th Commemoration
- Navy Band Holiday Concert, DAR Constitution Hall
- Jacksonville/Kingsbay MLA Orientation Trip
- Freshman Member QUICKLOOK Caribbean
- CV Embark
- CLA Member Calls

**SURFACE/SEALIFT:**

- Brief Staff on Sealift Acquisition Plan
- Brief Staff on ASW Standoff Plan
- Strategic Sealift Funding Plan
- Rep Weldon to BIW
- Staffers to Arleigh Burke trials (PSMs & MLAs, Mine Warfare Education for Staffers)

**SUBMARINE/STRATEGIC/NUCLEAR:**

- Trident Visit (START issues) Ann Sauer/Brian Darley (PSMs, SASC)
- Sen Mack (R-FL) and Sen Smith (R-NH) ride 688 SSN from PEV, FL
- Jim Miller/Wade Heck (PSMs, HASC) tour SWFLANT/Trident
- Drell Panel briefed by RADM Mitchell
- Ron O'Rourke, CRS, visit EB Groton
- START Plan 2010 briefing for SASC
- Rep Franks (R-CT) tour SUBASE New London
- New design submarine briefings HASC/SASC
- Jack Mansfield (PSM, SASC) Trident ride

**SENAT**

**STAFFDEL MOORE TRIP TO CAPE  
CANAUVERAL (RTN 5 NOV)- CAPT  
ORR**

**STAFFDEL CREEDON TRIP TO  
JACKSONVILLE, FL; KINGS BAY,  
GA; LOS ALAMOS, SANTA FE, NM;  
DENVER, CO; AMARILLO, TX (RTN  
7 NOV)- CDR DUNNE**

**(T) STAFFDEL RINGO TRIP TO  
DALLAS, TX (RTN 7 NOV)- CDR  
HINSON**

**USMC BIRTHDAY CAKE CUTTING**

**(T) CODEL YOUNG TRIP TO SAN  
DIEGO, CAMP PENDLETON, CA (RTN  
9 NOV) COL MILLER**

**SUNDAY, 3 NOV**

**MARINE CORPS MARATHON**

**MONDAY, 4 NOV**

**TUESDAY, 5 NOV**

**WEDNESDAY, 6 NOV**

**THURSDAY, 7 NOV**

**FRIDAY, 8 NOV**

**HOUSE**

**(T) CODEL DELLUMS TRIP TO  
PANAMA CITY, FL (RTN 5 NOV)-  
CDR BENKERT**

**STAFFDEL REED TRIP TO AUSTIN,  
DALLAS, TX (RTN 6 NOV)- LCDR  
VAN BUSKIRK**

**USMC BIRTHDAY CAKE CUTTING**

**(T) CODEL BYRON TRIP TO KEY  
WEST, FL; HAGERSTOWN, MD (RTN  
9 NOV) CDR STANTON**